

## **Imaginative Voyaging; Fashion practice as a 'site' for wonder and enchantment**

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### **Abstract**

The aim of this paper is to explore the state of wonder within a transitional and transformative context and its potential to inform experimental fashion practices. In particular it will focus on the emotionally generative possibilities that wonder and enchantment can have on our experience of fashion. Wonder itself can take a number of forms, whether it entails being “wonder struck” by an event or something that has been seen, or to wonder as in to question, to be curious, to harbour doubt. It is this questioning and openness that is the basis of wonder’s connection to the artistic process and this paper examines how it can be applied within a fashion context. This approach to creative practice and its connection to wonder has its theoretical foundations in the work of authors such as Greenblatt and Kosky.

The state of wonder itself has the potential to engage our imagination with fashion “encounters”. Familiar enchanting sites for encounter and possible wonder sites within a fashion context include the fashion show, which in recent times has expanded to encompass installation and presentation formats. These shows and their inducement of a potential sense of wonder, owe much to their large scale and performative nature. Examples of this include the presentations and collaborative projects of designers and practitioners such as Alexander McQueen and Hussein Chalayan. Here the fashion “experience” is transient and ephemeral in nature, where those present gain the full impact or experience of the encounter. As Andrew Bolton (Bolton & Koda, 2011), referencing Alexander McQueen’s immersive and sometimes confronting presentations states, “McQueen validates powerful emotions as compelling and undeniable sources of aesthetic experiences”. This paper explores how, rather than the ephemeral fashion experience or “moment” being seen as a final outcome, one which is the domain of large scale fashion brands, it can also

have relevance to small scale experimental fashion practices and within this context be present within the design process itself.

The paper focuses on exploring the transitional “moments” or potential encounters that happen within the fashion design process for both practitioners and their audience. The paper reframes the fashion design process as a series of potential wonder sites, where further creative exploration can occur, not within the clearly defined areas of a traditional practice, but those that exist in the shadows or void. This reframing is further enhanced within the context of an interdisciplinary approach, where the oscillation between mediums, creative approaches and technologies has offered opportunity for innovation and for traditional approaches to fashion practice to be broken down.

In conclusion the paper explores how an interdisciplinary approach to fashion practice provides a destabilized or disruptive experience of the fashion process, therefore opening up possibilities for our engagement with wonder in fashion, thereby potential sites of fashion encounters are expanded and go beyond traditional final outcomes.

Keywords: wonder, disruption, transformation, interdisciplinary, transitional

## Introduction

This speculative research draws on work being undertaken within a practice-led research PhD. The research aims to open up the possibility for wonder “sites” to exist within the wider breadth of fashion practice. Wonder is being explored through a small scale interdisciplinary fashion practice within an “open” context, an approach whereby there is no end but a cycle of change, enabling a constant sense of disruption, transition and transformation. The practice is exploring the idea of wonder in terms of its emotionally generative possibilities and as a renewable and shifting site where we engage with surface, space and place for creative, emotional and critical engagement. Jeffrey Kosky, talking about wonder in his book *Arts of Wonder*, states:

It aims to maintain the striving and uncertainty of an encounter in which you do not always know what you want to say before you say it – very often because the effect the thing has is to give you new and unexpected words. A tentative and probing way – striving and remaining open – this is the way we proceed when we encounter something wonderful. (Kosky, 2013)

In the process of exploring the state of wonder the research aims to understand how this particular engagement with the image/garment/artefact is different from the one that we experience every day. The creative works produced within the practice, including artwork, garment, artefact, and moving image, have explored devices that are recognized in some ways as being connected to our experience of wonder. The insights gained so far during their production, both individually and collaboratively, have highlighted that a disruptive approach, transition and the process of transformation through both material and its spatial placing are all significant in encouraging an engagement with wonder.

The research aims to connect with a range of design mediums and methodologies beyond the field of fashion, including art, design, architecture and installation through an interdisciplinary approach. The aim will be to develop a method of working that is integrative and projective, where there are a series of possible avenues of investigation, therefore the practice is allowing the work to be read in the context of its complex cultural and personal connections. Precedence for this manner of working can be found in the explorative and expansive fashion practices of Boudicca, Bless and Sandra Backlund. As Zoe Ryan (2012) states:

These ideas driven designers embrace a more cross-disciplinary method, harnessing film, photography, graphic design, and performance art to create work that revises conventional methods of fashion presentation and provides tools with which the viewers can further engage the work and make sense of it.

So far the wonder sites that have been identified as potentially existing within the fashion design process are those of “process” as in research, “production” in terms of make, and “performance” in its representation and presentation. Within this

Framework the research practice has recognized the importance of often overlooked areas of creativity and engagement. The practice has embraced elements of risk, chance and opportunity, and what are often seen as mistakes, as potential “devices” within process, in order to explore our engagement with the image/garment/artefact/space and how what can often be seen as wrong, can be perceived as moments of enchanting difference.

## Disruption through Process

The creation of imagery and artwork within the practice to date has built on the potential for innovation that exists when engaging with both analogue and digital methods within the design and image making process. This has included the relationship between silkscreen mono-printing and digital printing, and explored the moments of change that happen when oscillating between manual techniques and digital media.

This open process of exploration and image creation and its subsequent outcomes, has led to an interest in the “gestural” mark or abstracted image, and is being explored not only within its visual representation but also as an expressive, physical and creative act of the designer/maker. These gestural images have been created in an active and disruptive sense; they are images that embody action, purpose and movement; they are both visual evidence and ephemeral gestural artefacts that depict frozen moments of action, meaning and creation, changing as they oscillate between diverse surfaces and material.

When looking at these images as part of process, the practice can engage with the disruptive – in regards to what is being visualized – marks and layers of information and activity, produced through a creative gestural action. In this context the practice is seeing these active gestures as a series of disruptions to our expected way of interpreting what we see or encounter. This form of disruption correlates through to the potential experience of wonder in that it is the opposite of what is expected and is open to interpretation, therefore the antithesis of a prescriptive or defined methodology. The disruptive approach encourages the designer/maker and viewer to foster a method of engagement that is open-ended and non-defined, therefore



challenging the traditional expectations of the experience of the image within a fashion framework. This method of research practice capitalizes on the potentialities that a sense of changeability, fluctuation and transformation can instigate.

This form of opening a creative practice up through an engagement with disruption, and hence potentially wonder, means that rather than have a defined or singular outcome which would correlate with a more traditional visualization or making process within fashion practice, by allowing elements of chance and risk to be involved then the seeds of doubt and possibility can be planted, allowing the mind and the hand to wonder. It is this sense of destabilization and “wondering” activity that occurs from a disruptive approach that allows wonder to be potentially sited in the process of image creation within the research practice. As Malpass (2006) states:

Wonder and the encounter with the wondrous, represents a sudden disabling, an intrusion into our normal activities and a disruption of those activities. The experience of wonder thus takes us out of our ordinary involvement with things and makes what is ordinarily unquestioned, questionable, makes what ordinarily seems familiar strange.



Figure 1. Armando Chant, 2014.

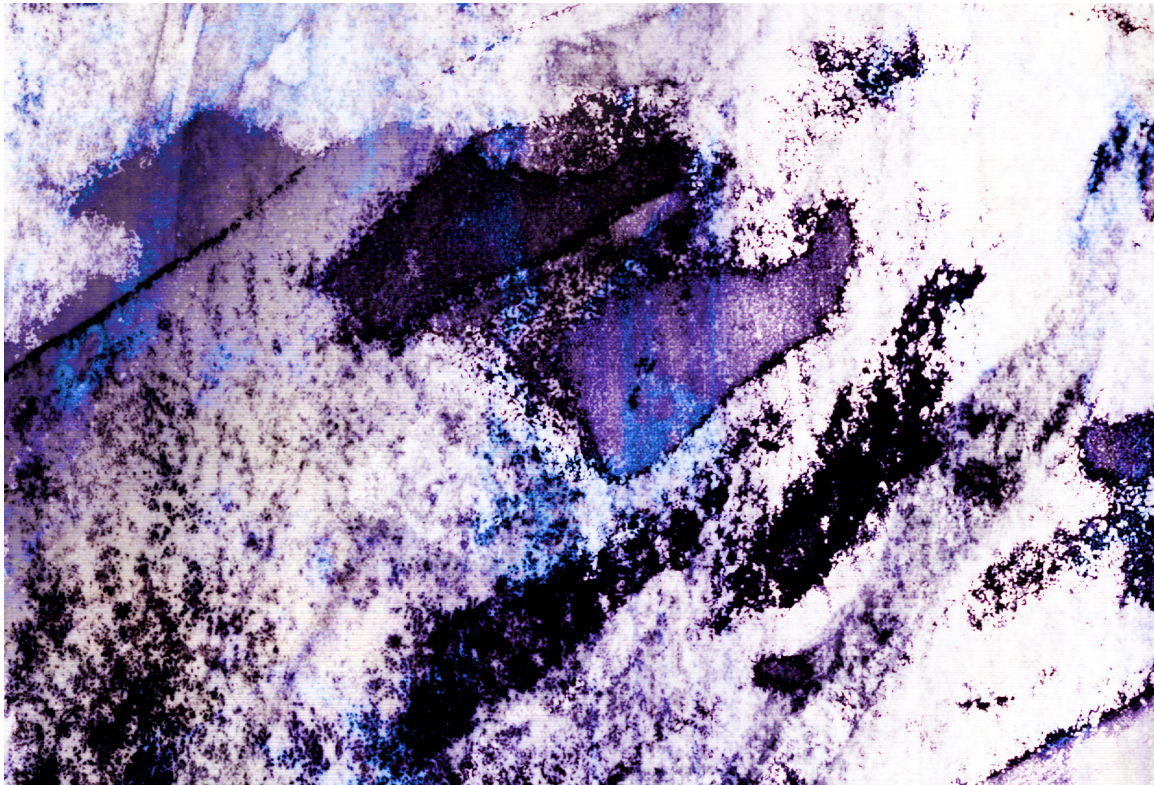


Figure 2. Armando Chant, 2014.

### Gesture as ephemeral fragment

When analyzing the imagery (examples of which can be seen in Figures 1 and 2) that have been created within the practice's process, it has become evident that it is important to view them not only in the context of a singular composition, comprising of multiple imprints and interrelated groupings of gestural elements, but also in the context of how this gestural mode of mark making is viewed as well as considering its perceptual resonance. The gesture can be reinterpreted in a multidimensional manner through its surface, structure, image and texture. These active, multidimensional and dynamic gestures, when seen as fragments or pieces, start to resonate with their own particular set of interpretive characteristics that in some ways are yet to be defined or framed, but have the potential to be connected to what surrounds them, in other words they are indefinable and in the process of becoming.

These fragments of ephemeral visual depiction can be thought of as small pieces of interpretive imagery that embody potentialities. When seen in a singular context they are potent singular gestures of an original ephemeral action, they resonate with

associations or connections creating a whole that is interpretive and disruptive to our everyday experience of the image.

The gestural and disruptive image, being composed of fragments and layers of abstracted marks, exists very much within a temporary or ephemeral context; they are not permanent in terms of a documentation of reality but an expression of a moment and an imprint of creative expression. In this sense the gesture oscillates between becoming and dematerializing before our eyes; it is a visual representation of a thought process that is ever changing.

### Gesture as narrative

The non-defined/abstract imagery that is being created within the practice through this method of disruptive making allows an experiential connection to happen between the designer/maker, image and viewer. The partial or fragmented image is not only being seen visually, but it can also be read through the viewing process, with its missing pieces or fragments being composed and imagined by the viewer. This seeing/reading experience activates a sense of doubt in that there is no defined image to see; it is shrouded or veiled with fragments of visual information located in the shadows.

The seeing/reading dynamic induced through the interpretive or abstracted image is enhanced by the dual aspect of the imagery. Absence/presence, positive/negative, and the seen/unseen are examples of the dual dynamics that are occurring. This oscillation between revealing and concealing creates a form of imbalance. Through its abstract form, the image is unstable, open to a constant form of interpretation and change, whereby the interpretive and destabilized image further explores its connection with duality in it being reflective, not only in its sense of having multiple forms of interpretation, but also in the sense of the image acting as a mirror. In this sense the practice is proposing that the imagery created can potentially act both as a facilitator for an act of personal introspective reflection but also as a conduit for a projective engagement.

This disruptive form of image making that the practice is engaging with, where visual



information lies in the shadows or is revealed through its very absence, opens up possibilities for alternative readings or methods of viewing where fragments become part of a story pieced together by our own personal memories. By looking at these marks as layers of sequential imagery, a potential narrative can be told or instigated by reading into the associations or connections that occur within the composition. These layers add information in the same way as pages within a journal or book activate our imagination the more we read. Thereby the visual narrative that they create has the potential to allow the viewer to be led on a journey through pattern and image that builds the more they change or transform.

The unintentional abstracted nature of the images being created allows a sense of oscillation, a backwards and forwards conversation of shifting and changing interpretations facilitating alternate visual realities to emerge. The disruptive and interpretive nature of these images means that they are not closed or definitive; they are visual forms of action and expression in a transitional state, thereby allowing the viewer to connect and engage. The nature of the gestural image has connections to the state of wonder in that it is a disruptive visual reconstitution or re-presentation of what exists at the time in a transitional state and requires a different mode of looking and engagement. As Crosby (2007) states, "It requires a transition from a common experience to an uncommon one, and the relative difference and startling transition between the two is the 'objective cause' of wonders elicitation."

The practice is building on the potentialities that the objective cause can offer within a design practice and how a visualization process that is led by disruption, allows a site for an engagement with wonder within the process to be explored. The designer makes a journal/sketchbook, preparatory drafts/sketches and subsequent artworks act as potential enchanting wonder sites within process; they are unfinished, in the act of becoming, the documentation of a process that is yet to be fully realized. Images created through an active gestural form in this way are enabling a sense of participatory imaginative wondering through the act of reading/looking, thereby establishing a relationship between gesture, image and viewer. As Greenblatt (1990) states:

Looking may be called enchanted when the act of attention draws around itself a circle from which everything but the object is excluded, when intensity of regard blocks out all circumambient images and stills all murmuring voices.

## Transitional artefact

The practice is exploring and developing the potentialities that exist in a disruptive image-making approach and the transformation that occurs when the image/garment/artefact transitions between one state and another through material and process. This sense of transitioning comes from the image/garment/artefact being interpreted as a nonrepresentational entity where the purpose is not for an accurate depiction of reality or form to be rendered, but a search for the image within a non-image, or the form within the form, one that has the essence of what is being seen, while allowing for the viewer's greater personal interpretation to be engaged.

Image/garment/artefact making, especially when positioned within the context of a practice-led research approach, correlates to the idea of knowledge through making; an interrelationship between hand and mind. If we consider the image/garment/artefact to be interpretive, then the recording or documentation or making process becomes a form of memory creation, knowledge making and a possible site for wonder in itself. Rather than view the image/garment/artefact and moving image as individual, defined by separate mediums or forms of creation, the practice is seeing them as a singular multifaceted and interpretive entity. The potential within the practice is for the abstract and nonrepresentational to be read as a transitional state of engagement and image and form shifting. The image/garment/artefact created through this process of disruption and destabilization, allows chance, risk and possibility to be embedded within the creative process, therefore allowing us to bring into existence a site of wonder that would normally lie on the periphery or be unrecognized.

The transitional aspect of the work allows recognition of the potentially fluid dynamic that can occur between the physical act of making and the contemplative experience of reflection. This dual form of engagement within a visual sense allows the viewer to

engage in a form of revealing, enabling access to the unknown or unexpected via a reprocessing of what we would ordinarily see. Reflection is also being considered as a form of thought generation and consciousness-raising, where the image/garment/artefacts are there to be reflected upon and interpreted within an undefined context: they are there to be experienced. The reflective experience allows an open and interpretive form of communication to happen between the viewer and maker. The practice and creative works produced within it are questioning how we perceive the image/garment/artefact and its interrelationships, including the act of making and subsequent reflection. In this manner the research is asking, through the transitional nature of the works, that we start to think of the relationship that we have with the image/garment/artefact and the space it is placed within.

The practice is proposing that the transitional image/garment/artefact being created is a temporary and fluctuating manifestation and never fixed, intimating the essence of where it has come from, be it technique, method or thematic, and its process of creation. As such, the work being non-defined and fluctuating in response to materiality and technique correlates through to the disruptive state of wonder. The practice proposes the possibility for transitional work to be seen as an active liminal site of wondrous encounter, where the wonder site can be re-formed, renewed and remade, caught in a constant cycle of change through its interactions with different mediums, technologies and hands. As can be seen in Figures 3 and 4, the documentation and recording of the image/garment/artefact is facilitating a process of capturing a moment and an encounter with the transitional whereby it embodies time, movement, creation and cultural connectivity.



Figure 3. Armando Chant, 2014.



Figure 4. Armando Chant, 2014.

## The resonant artefact/image

The images/garments/artefacts produced so far are being viewed as shifting manifestations of a disruptive and creative process that oscillates between two and three dimensions. This exploration of the potentials and experience of wonder has involved the recontextualization of the role and definition of the image/garment/artefact. The transitional and transformational nature of the creative works highlights the tensions and potentialities that exist in the “between” states of process, production and performance or moment of encounter. The experience of these works that are in a state of transition from one form to another is one whereby there is a push/pull dynamic occurring between logic and the illogical, the real and the unreal. The works can be seen as a series of interconnected and related two and three-dimensional interpretations that resonate and unfold in reference to each other, depending on their fluctuating state of existence. They are a series of material and immaterial revelations that provide clues to their next incarnation; the whole is never shown, only stages/phases/fragments that can lead to possibilities. As Bill Viola (1995) states, “It is a process of unfoldment, an evolving thread of the living moment.”

In this manner the research practice and its outcomes, having no definite form, shape or place, work as hybrids, artefacts of creative practice that resonate with cultural, technical and creative process. They are being revealed as fluid artefacts of creation, placed within a destabilized and indeterminate context. The aim of the practice is for the image/garment/artefact to transcend singular interpretations and speak in a multitude of ways whereby the experience of seeing becomes a form of questioning as to what, how, why and when these hybrid manifestations came to be and their resonant interrelationships. Greenblatt (1990), talking of the meaning and effect of “resonance” within the artefact, states, “By resonance I mean the power of the object displayed to reach out beyond its formal boundaries to a larger world, to evoke in the viewer the complex dynamic cultural forces from which it has emerged.”

With this notion of resonance in mind, the practice sees image/garment/artefact making as a form of illusionary world making, where abstract representations of the former are being created, which blurs the lines between reality and the imaginary,



activating potential sites and experiences of wonder. Within this illusionary space of creativity, the transitional nature of the image/garment/artefact is being explored through different stages, techniques, and forms of making. The practice is asking, can the resonance emanating from the image/garment/artefact be interpreted as a site for wonder, and therefore enable it to become an object of wonder?

### Elicitation of wonder through staging

The photographic, film and projection work produced and exhibited so far within the practice, as can be seen in Figures 5 and 6, explores how the image/garment/artefact has been activated through movement and time. When presented in a spatial context, the work provides a platform for performative engagement between viewer/image/maker, and references the immersive, transitional and imaginative space.



Figure 5. Armando Chant, 2014.



Figure 6. Armando Chant, 2014.

The research practice is exploring the idea of a fashion environment as an enchanting space of encounter, a transformative space, where a visual and imagined engagement can potentially expand or collapse our experience of fashion, altering modes of perception, experience and display. The fashion environment could potentially provide a spatial experience of fashion whereby the actual garment/artefact does not need to be there, however its presence is indicated or suggested.

This way of working for designer/maker, and viewing on the part of the participant, links through to a way of perceiving through feeling, rather than being based on known facts or methods. It requires a release of prior knowledge, and an engagement with instinct and memory. By engaging with the image/garment/artefact in this way the potential is for an “atmospheric” experience of fashion to act as an emotive site for the encounter with wonder. As Gernot Bohme (2007) states, with regards to the encounter with the atmospheric, “What is perceived is an indeterminate spatially extended quality of feeling.” It is this sense of indeterminacy

and feeling that the practice understands as a potential “wondrous” encounter with fashion.

## Immersive Space

When exploring the potential for a wonder site to exist within the presentation and representation of fashion, it is important to consider how these spaces can become immersive environments of momentary experience. Just like there are certain expectations with regards to making and creating, there are also expectations with regards to the presentation and experience of fashion. The research practice is exploring possibilities for alternative methods of experiencing the image/garment/artefact and how these can be transformative and ephemeral in nature.

The tendency is to want to define certain spaces of experience and the presumed sensation we are to feel or engage with when we are within them, however space itself is a non-defined entity, only defined by its boundaries, how it is contained, or in reference to its surroundings. What if these spaces were sites for an engagement with wonder to occur, changeable according to what is shown, in relation to each other and open to individual interpretation. The focus on the immersive, rather than the singular or specific, opens up the idea of the wonder site as not only being part of an individual engagement, but also being a total experience, encompassing all the senses. In this way the embodied fashion wonder site can become an interconnected series of sites or fields where the purely visual has been transcended and the possibility to engage with the unfamiliar, unreal or destabilized is facilitated.

The experience of fashion within its space of presentation, brings to our attention the possible dynamics that can occur when the image/garment/artefact is “placed”. Tensions reveal themselves in this meeting of visual representations, in a process of placement and displacement. The sense of displacement, tension and unease contributes to a spatial experience of the image/garment/artefact that is in constant flux, where there is a sense of forms shifting in their visualization and interpretation.

The transformative and transitional image/garment/artefact adds another level of interpretive engagement when it expands within a three-dimensional space through film and projection. The moving image is transformative in that it is fleeting, ever changing, oscillating between emergence and disappearance, revealing and concealing. We are catching brief glimpses of movement, expression and emotion and, therefore, activating the site in which it sits. As the artist Bill Viola (1995), talking about his practice and works, states:

We view video and film in the present tense – we ‘see’ one frame at a time passing before us in this moment. We don’t see what is before it and what is after it – we only see the narrow slit of ‘now’.

### Transitional space

The imagery created through a time-based medium initiates a push/pull experience between what is being seen and what is being experienced, while the practice has recognized that experiencing the image/garment/artefact in this manner, is potentially triggering an encounter which references past and future personal imaginings. This experiential interaction arises in response to the blurring of the image/world relationship that takes place when there is a visual, temporal and spatial shift. The subtle change of one image into another, or one form of movement through to another, and its extension beyond the screen or surface asks us to question what is happening within this space of transitional experience, it asks us to wonder. The way we perceive the moving image in a transformative context is that it can be engaged with, we can inhabit the picture plane and the narrative that is being performed within it, thereby its extension within a spatial context allows a sense of inhabiting an environment or wonder site of creative transformation. As Greenblatt (1990) states; “Wonder here is not a steady state; its inherently unstable, a shifter, not only the sign but the principle instigator of movement.”

This engagement with a visually and sensorial active space opens up potential for a fashion space to provide an environment which is balanced between the real and the virtual, part of a illusionistic and transitory experience that can embody fashion. The spaces are on the threshold between the physical and the ethereal, where the

experience of fashion is embodied in the fluid relationship between maker/performer and space.

These marginal, peripheral or liminal spaces can be considered spaces which are not normally recognized; they sit on the edge or threshold of engagement. The opportunity that has been identified by the practice and that is being explored is for a spatially and emotionally disruptive fashion experience to occur whereby this marginal or liminal space can be activated by image/garment/artefact. The practice is asking what the potential is for inter-disciplinary fashion practices to engage with liminal spaces, the marginal, and for them to be seen as sites or fields of wonder that exist within, and in the inbetween spaces of process, production and performance.

### Imaginative space

The abstracted, evolving and imaginary space provides a platform for us to encounter the extraordinary in the ordinary. The projections and video created to date has the potential to create, within a temporary context, interpretive experiences that are different from everyday life. This disruptive imaginative/liminal space allows an interpretive platform for images/garments/artefacts to appear and disappear. The image/garment/artefact and the spatial dynamic occurring within this liminal space is actively informed by personal experience or memory and thus individual narratives can be informed, making the imaginative encounter and liminal space a site or field for wondrous encounter.

The embodied experience of fashion can relate to the atmospheric, where the body, mind, object, image and space interact. The atmospheric experience of fashion, or one that is embodied, is one that has no borders; it is undefined. The terms to describe such an experience, be it ambience, space or atmosphere, all indicate an indeterminate presence of fashion rather than the definite. Gernot Bohme (2007), commenting on the relationship between aesthetics and the atmospheric, states:

Atmospheres are indeterminate above all as regards to their ontological status. We are not sure whether we should attribute them to the objects or environments from which they precede or to the subjects that experience them.

We are also unsure where they are. They seem to fill the space with a certain tone, or feeling, like a haze.

The atmospheric experience of the work and the space within which it sits is a form of imaginative wondering; it is not fixed, it is not static, there is a constant sense of movement and fluctuation. In fact the only certainty is change in its form, shape and representation and subsequent readings. The research practice considers this transitory state of atmospheric experience as a potential wonder site, nonexistent and ephemeral, but also a significant part of our experience of wonder in response to what we see, a spatial and experiential oscillation between the internal and the external.

## Conclusion

The works created within the research practice thus far have started to explore the fluid dynamic between methods of creation, what is created, how it is presented, and the potential for emotional engagement throughout this process. The projects are sites for the creative action, and knowledge through making to occur, but also an exploration of potential sites of wonder. The image/garment/artefact is seen as an oscillating and ever-changing entity that acts as a platform for the connectivity and repository of memory, possibility and creation; they are sites for wonder that engage with disruptive, transitional and transformative forms of engagement. The experience of being immersed in a creative process, method of production or performance is one of being totally engaged with the wonder site in its totality. Therefore the experience of wonder and its siting within the fashion design process can occur at any moment.

The expansion of the fashion practice through engagement with interdisciplinary methodologies and practices has allowed it to be open-ended, unframed and with no fixed or defined boundaries. The form, technique and shape shifting from image to garment to artefact and back to image, emphasizes the disruptive, transitional and transformative nature of an immersive and wondrous experience. The experience of fashion, both for practitioner/maker and consumer, is a constant interplay of performative gestures, where the spaces fashion is experienced crosses many sites. The goal of the practice is not to induce a defined and fixed experience of the work; it



aims to trigger an individual and personal experience of the work that oscillates between engagement, reflection and resistance.

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